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Viewing cable 08SANAA1053, YEMEN'S BIG BROTHER: WHAT HAS SAUDI ARABIA DONE

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08SANAA1053	2008-06-18 09:26	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET	Embassy Sanaa

Appears in these articles:

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SUBJECT: YEMEN'S BIG BROTHER: WHAT HAS SAUDI ARABIA DONE FOR YEMEN LATELY?

REF: A. IIR 6 906 0126 07

[1](#)B. IIR 6 906 0078 08

[1](#)C. IIR 6 906 0051 08

[1](#)D. IIR 6 906 0041 08

[1](#)E. SANAA 517

[1](#)F. SANAA 385

[1](#)G. IIR 6 906 0305 07

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) AMEMBASSY Riyadh and AMCONGEN Jeddah have cleared this cable.

Summary

[1](#)2. (C) Yemen has a long history of relations with Saudi Arabia based primarily on their 1500 km shared border, which has led to extensive social, religious and business ties. Yemenis perceive the relationship as heavily balanced in favor of Saudi Arabia, which remains involved in Yemen, to the extent necessary, to counter the potential threat of Yemen's unemployed masses, poor security, unrest, crime and the intentions of foreign countries (Libya and Iran) that might create a threat on Saudi Arabia's southern border. Yemen, on the other hand, growls at the hand that might feed it. It is resentful of Saudi Arabia's preeminence and is weary of Saudi involvement in its domestic affairs. Despite this, Yemen receives substantial development assistance from Saudi Arabia and seeks Saudi help to open doors to organizations it wants to join, like the Gulf Cooperation Council. Consequently, Yemen has, on occasion, swallowed its resentment and acquiesced to Saudi wishes. END SUMMARY.

Security

[1](#)3. (U) The independent English language newspaper Yemen Observer reported in November 2007 that Saudi King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz said Yemen's security is "inseparable" from the Kingdom's security. Yemenis see this as both a signal of solidarity and a cause for concern, for if inseparable then Saudi Arabia has cause to meddle in Yemeni affairs. Extremists and terrorist elements are active in Yemen, and the lack of central authority in Yemen means that Yemen is a fertile breeding ground and a potential training area for extremists.

[1](#)4. (U) Rumors persist in Yemen that Saudis fund many of Yemen's internal conflicts. Saudi Arabia supported and funded royalist forces in Yemen in the 1962 revolutionary war against Egyptian-backed republicans. Again in the 1994 civil war, Saudi Arabia supported the southern secessionists against the Saleh government. "Elaph.com" reported on November 14, 2007, that King Abdullah met with Yemeni opposition figures in London, lending credence to Yemeni allegations of Saudi interference in current North-South relations. Yemeni privately-owned newspaper al-Shari' wrote that senior Saudi officials met exiled Yemeni leadership in August 2007, opining that these meetings usurped Saleh's attempts to secure meetings with the same exiled Yemenis. Al-Shari' asserted that this interference gave Saudi Arabia a degree of control over the developments in the south.

[1](#)5. (S) The ROYG has been unable to resolve its conflict with the al-Houthi Zaydi adherents in Saada, which borders Saudi Arabia. According to a Yemen-based Saudi official (ref A), Saudi Arabia doubled its border guards along the Saada border in March 2007 due to fighting. In a worst case scenario the

al-Houthi conflict could spill over the border, requiring a Saudi reaction.

¶6. (C) Basha Bashraheel, editor and owner of Aden-based independent newspaper al-Ayyam, alleges that private Saudi nationals are helping the al-Houthis in their fight against the ROYG, a claim echoed by Majid al-Fahed, the Executive Director of the NGO Civic Democratic Initiatives Support Foundation (CDF). Al-Fahed, a Saada native, said that most tribes in Saada are part of the larger tribal confederation of Qudah, most of whom live in Saudi Arabia but who retain tribal loyalties. On the other hand, Hassan Zaid, leader of the banned al-Haq party (a Zaydi party accused by the ROYG of being pro-Houthi), told PolOff that the ROYG received official Saudi assistance to pursue the war.

Counterterrorism

¶7. (U) Saudi Arabia and Yemen praise their cooperation on counterterrorism, but give few details. The Saudi News Agency reported on November 13 that Crown Prince Sultan said Yemen and Saudi Arabia were jointly fighting 'deviant

SANAA 00001053 002 OF 005

thought' that was at the root of terrorism. On March 27, AFP reported that Yemen handed over to Saudi Arabia four Saudi nationals suspected of ties to al-Qaida. Since signing a 2003 extradition agreement, Saudi Arabia and Yemen have exchanged dozens of terror suspects. ROYG successes in counterterrorism over 2007 pale in comparison with Saudi Arabia's. To date, Yemen appears to have learnt and gained little from the two countries' cooperation.

Illegal Immigrants

¶8. (S) Bashraheel told PolOff that, during the month of December 2007, Saudi Arabia chartered one or two Saudi Arabian Airlines jumbo jets per night to return Yemeni illegal immigrants to the Sana'a airport at Saudi expense. He added that most of these illegal immigrants turned around and crossed back over the border. Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Ali bin Muhammad al-Hamdan reiterated these statements to PolE Chief, saying he considered illegal immigration to be the biggest issue in the bilateral relationship. Al-Hamdan noted that 10,000 illegal immigrants try to cross the border each month. He confirmed that Saudi Arabia repatriated as many as 400,000 Yemenis in 2007. There are up to 800,000 legal Yemeni residents in Saudi Arabia, necessitating constant ROYG dialogue with the Saudi government. These Yemenis make it easier for illegal Yemenis to blend in and find work and a place to live in Saudi Arabia.

How Yemenis think Saudi Arabia Sees Them

¶9. (S) Yemenis are aware that other Arab nationalities, including Saudis, see them as backward uncivilized people. In ref B, Yemeni Colonel Handhal, commander of al-Badieh military airfield near the Saudi border, said that Saudis treat Yemenis as second class citizens. This second class designation may extend to the official level as well. Shaykh Mohammed Naji al-Shaif, a senior GPC Member of Parliament and an apparent heir to be the Bakil Shaykh of Shaykhs (Note: The Bakil, the most populous tribal confederation in Yemen, are concentrated along the Saudi border. End Note.) told the Ambassador that President Saleh had hoped to be close to Saudi King Abdullah. He added that the al-Sauds had "played with Saleh before, but now they know him" and so Saleh finds himself on official visits to Saudi Arabia meeting Crown Prince Sultan instead.

Smuggling and the Border

¶10. (U) Saudi Arabia and Yemen successfully concluded border

demarcation talks in 2000. Actual border demarcation, however, continued until 2006. Border authorities from both sides held a first meeting on August 12-14, 2007 to discuss technical assistance. Yemen now attends monthly border security meetings with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and Yemen claimed, in a November 15 article by Malaysian official news agency Bernama, to have continuous and direct information exchange on nationals crossing the border. A SABA news article from January 8 quoted Saudi Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry Abdullah al-Hamoudi saying Yemen and Saudi Arabia "would discuss issues of unifying administrative procedures to facilitate the process of transporting goods." SABA reported on January 9 that Saudi Arabia would provide Yemen with x-ray machines at all its border crossings with Yemen.

¶11. (C) On a less positive note, on January 12 the Yemen Observer newspaper reported Saudi Arabia began erecting barriers, including ditches and barbed wire, on a part of the border susceptible to illegal crossings, which triggered mobilization by Yemeni and Saudi border guards. (COMMENT: Though Yemeni authorities later disavowed the story, aerial photographs and protests by Yemenis resident along the border suggest animosities were real. END COMMENT.)

¶12. (S) Post reported in ref C that an Indian Military Advisor to Saudi Arabia, Colonel Raj S. Yadav, said that Saudi-Yemeni relations were passive-aggressive, adding that Saudi Arabia would like Yemen to do more on the Saudi-Yemen border, but isn't willing to force Yemen to tighten its borders. Major General Mohammed Ali Mohsen Saleh, a half brother to Yemeni President Saleh and Eastern Regional Commander, admitted that though Yemeni-Saudi cooperation was good, the border was just too big and there were just not enough soldiers to adequately monitor all of it (ref D).

¶13. (U) There is substantial smuggling across the Yemeni-Saudi border, which enriches Yemenis. The Associated Press reported on February 6 that between October and December 2007, Saudi authorities arrested 880 alleged

SANAA 00001053 003 OF 005

smugglers, many of whom were Yemenis, along this border. In that same period, Saudi border authorities captured 100 kilograms of explosives, 400 weapons, 50,000 pieces of ammunition, 100 sticks of dynamite, 2,000 kilograms of hashish, four kilograms of marijuana and 40,000 pills. Yemeni News Agency reported on January 25 that Yemeni police seized around 600 kilograms of hashish in Amran governorate in northern Yemen close to the Saudi border. (COMMENT: Since Qat is the drug of choice in Yemen, the hashish was mostly likely bound for Saudi Arabia. END COMMENT.)

Agreement on International Issues

¶14. (U) Yemen agrees with Saudi Arabia on many issues pertaining to the Arab world, including how to resolve the Darfur crisis in Sudan, condemnation of political assassinations in Lebanon, what is needed to prevent nuclear proliferation in Iran, appeals to Somalia for peace, non-proliferation and nuclear inspections for Israel, and the importance of Iraqi unity, sovereignty, security and stability. Going further, Yemen's recent venture into the Palestinian Hamas/Fatah divide (ref E) is seen in some Yemeni circles as an extension of Saudi Arabia's own proposal for Arab-Israeli peace.

¶15. (U) Despite their general agreement on issues, Yemen Today magazine reported in its March issue that Saudi Arabia is one of the opposing voices to Yemen's desire for accession to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Nonetheless, Yemen has won Saudi approval for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

¶16. (C) The ROYG intended to go to the Arab League Summit in Syria, but after Saudi Arabia spoke to the ROYG, Saleh

announced in March that Yemen would not be represented at the head of state level (ref F). (Comment: Yemen's willingness to acquiesce to Saudi wishes deserves more study by the USG in our attempts to advance USG interests in Yemen. End Comment.)

Development Assistance

¶17. (U) Yemeni Ministry of Foreign Affairs Gulf and Arab Countries Department Head Ambassador Abdulkader Hadi told PolOff that Saudi Arabia is one of Yemen's most important development-assistance donors. At the November 2006 London conference, which Saudi Arabia was instrumental in organizing, Saudi Arabia pledged USD 1 billion to Yemen. The English-language Yemen Times newspaper on November 14, 2007 reported that at a mid-November conference between the two countries Saudi Arabia donated USD 652 million to Yemen's development including improving facilities at four hospitals, a power plant in Marib and a number of technical training centers. Arab News reported on November 15 that the Saudi government signed additional contracts for locust control (training Yemeni and providing vehicles and equipment) and to finance Saudi exports to Yemen.

¶18. (U) Yemen also receives training and exchange opportunities from Saudi Arabia. Arab News reported on November 15 that Saudi Arabia was increasing scholarships for Yemenis from 100 to 150. (Comment: These scholarships may be intended for Yemenis resident in Saudi Arabia. End Comment.) The article went on to report that seats at Saudi universities for Yemeni expatriate students went up from 20 to 50 and an additional 25 Yemenis would be given admission to Saudi technical and vocational training institutes. Yemen's official news agency SABA further reported on February 25 agreements for mutual visits, exchanges and seminars at colleges of petroleum and minerals in Yemeni universities.

Tribal Assistance

¶19. (S) Yemen's proximity to Saudi Arabia and their history means that many tribes in Yemen share common ancestry with Saudi tribes. Yemenis contend the Saudis are paying shaykhs in Yemen for information, to ensure leverage over Yemeni domestic politics and for the allegiance of the shaykhs and their tribes. Bashraheel told PolOff that the now deceased Paramount Shaykh of the Hashid Confederation, Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar, had been receiving large payments from the Saudi government. He contended these payments would now be paid to his son Shaykh Hussayn Abdullah al-Ahmar. Nabil Basha, a GPC member of Parliament, corroborated this, adding that Hussayn was receiving three to four billion Yemeni riyals a month -- less than his late father, who reportedly received seven billion Yemeni riyals a month. While few contacts are willing to speculate on the total sum Saudis pay annually to

SANAA 00001053 004 OF 005

Yemeni shaykhs, Saudi Arabia's 2007 national day reception suggests that these Yemeni contentions are probably not far off the mark. Almost every shaykh of any stature was invited, leaving the diplomatic community as a side event (ref G).

Saudis of Hadrami Origin

¶20. (C) Another interesting dynamic in the Yemeni-Saudi relationship is the large number of affluent Saudi nationals of Yemeni, more precisely Hadrami (from Hadramout Governorate), descent. According to Saudi Ambassador Ali al-Hamdan, these families and other Yemenis in Saudi Arabia send considerable amounts of money to their extended families in Yemen.

¶21. (U) Hadrami Saudis include the billionaire families Bin

Laden (family wealth is estimated at USD 5 billion), Bin Mahfouz (USD 4 billion) and Bouqshan Shaykh Abdullah Ahmed Bouqshan (personal worth is USD 3.2 billion). On March 26 and 27, Shaykh Bouqshan sponsored an investment conference in Hadramaut. In a Yemen Today magazine interview from March 2008, Bouqshan said since his first visit to his ancestral homeland in 2002, he has completed large development projects, including a road network, an electrical network, four schools and a hospital for his home town in Wadi Do'an. He has invested USD 305 million in companies in cement, fish and tourism, and is now considering investing in a petrochemical plant in Yemen.

Economic Integration

¶22. (U) The Yemen Observer reported on January 12 that the ROYG was establishing three free commercial and economic border zones, two of them with Saudi Arabia. These zones are aimed to combat poverty and unemployment. (Note: Vocational training centers for Yemenis are to be collocated. End Note.) Yemen Today reported that Yemeni illegal migrants could cause "embarrassing political situations... if they (GCC) opened their markets to Yemeni laborers," and said this could be offset by offering employment locally. The Yemen Observer reported on March 30 that Saudi groups desired to invest in free trade zones in Yemen and construction projects, including projects on the island of Socotra.

Oil and the Yemeni Succession

¶23. (C) A British diplomat based in Yemen told PolOff that Saudi Arabia had an interest to build a pipeline, wholly owned, operated and protected by Saudi Arabia, through Hadramaut to a port on the Gulf of Aden, thereby bypassing the Arabian Gulf/Persian Gulf and the straits of Hormuz. Saleh has always opposed this. The diplomat contended that Saudi Arabia, through supporting Yemeni military leadership, paying for the loyalty of shaykhs and other means, was positioning itself to ensure it would, for the right price, obtain the rights for this pipeline from Saleh's successor.

Religion and Unrest

¶24. (C) Wahabism, teachings from the Hanbali school of Islam that predominate in Saudi Arabia, is becoming more influential in Yemen. Locally referred to as Salafis, followers of Wahabism are taking key positions in a number of Yemeni institutions. Ali Muhsen al-Ahmar, the Northwest military commander and one of the prime contenders to succeed Saleh, has long been recruiting Salafist soldiers to fight al-Houthi insurgents in Saada. (Note: Salafis are Sunni and the al-Houthis are Shia. End Note.) Increasingly conservative in his actions, Ali Muhsin is considered a Salafi by many. Secretary General Hassan Zaid of the banned al-Haq party told PolE Chief that the opposition Islah party is now almost exclusively Salafist with only a few token moderates. (Note: Zaid's al-Haq party is a co-member of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties with Islah. End Note.) Mohamed Aboulahoum of the GPC told PolE/E Chief recently that there were now ten Salafi-controlled mosques in Sana'a, with lesser numbers in other major Yemeni cities. He pointed out that the mosque near him has space for 150 students in its school. He noted that if the other mosques are equally equipped, then Salafi-controlled mosques have the potential to turn out 1,500 ardent Salafists in the capital alone. "That's how they will increase their influence," he said.

¶25. (C) Professor Mohamed Mutawakel of the opposition Union of Popular Forces (and an active leader within the JMP) told PolE Chief that he believes the Saleh regime is actively seeking to increase the prevalence of Salafi teachings in

SANAA 00001053 005 OF 005

Yemen. When PolE Chief asked why Saleh, who is from a

predominantly Zaydi (Shia) area, would advance the interests of a foreign Sunni religious group, Mutawakel explained that Salafis believe that as long as a government is in any way Islamic, Muslims should not try to overthrow it. Zaydi teaching, by contrast, admonishes adherents to work to change any government that fails to "achieve justice." Mutawakel believes, as do other embassy contacts, that the ROYG considers a Salafi presence as a pacifying force in a country facing unrest in both the north and south.

COMMENT

¶26. (C) There would appear to be the room for the USG to work with Saudi Arabia to influence the Yemeni regime to address short-comings in Yemen's counterterrorism efforts and security, both areas in which Saudi Arabia has shown capacity. They include combating violent extremist thought, rehabilitation programs for extremists, and handling of returned Guantanamo detainees. These efforts will have to maneuver through a minefield of ROYG suspicions of Saudi intentions for Yemen. The USG nevertheless should consider how to use Saudi Arabia to address development in Yemen to ameliorate the potential danger Yemen poses to stability in the region. The British government already has a clear policy, reiterated in donor meetings, of including talking points on Yemen for UK Ministers visiting Saudi Arabia. The Dutch Embassy has approached PolOff to ask for coordination on a donor approach to Saudi Arabia's possible involvement. Given their long, shared border and evident Saudi concern about the effects of an unstable Yemen, we should be able to convince Saudi Arabia that it needs to act in its own best interest to ensure that its southern neighbor meets the serious economic and political challenges that confront it. The USG advocacy, however, must be tempered to ensure that Saudi Arabia knows the USG does not/not aim to make Yemen a vassal state.

SECHE